

A Romance of Mystery, Love and Adventure.

THE BLACK BAG

By Joseph Vance,
Author of "The Brass Bowl," "The
Private War," Etc.

"The Black Bag," whose first instalment is here printed, is the most remarkable romance of the year. Every line a live wire. The story will appear, complete, in long, daily instalments on this page of The Evening World.

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CHAPTER I.

A Ruined Gentleman.

UPON a certain dreary April afternoon in the year of grace, 1880, the apprehensions of Philip Kirkwood, Equine, artist-painter, were enlivened by the discovery that he was occupying that singularly distressing social position which may be summed up succinctly in a phrase through long usage grown proverbial: "Alone in London." These three words have come to connote in our understanding too much of human misery that to Mr. Kirkwood they seemed to epitomize his life. It was not happily the various circumstances attendant upon the predicament wherein he found himself. Inevitably an extremist, because of his youth he had just turned twenty-five, he took no count of mitigating matters, and would not have resented the suggestion that his case was anything but a case of desperate and forlorn.

That he was not actually at the end of his resources went for nothing; he had the distinction a quibble, mockingly immaterial-like the score of guineas in his pocket, too insignificant for mention when contrasted with his needs. And his base of supplies, the American city of his nativity, whence and not without a glow of pride in his social mediocrity, he was wont to register at foreign hostels, had been abruptly cut off from him by one of those accidents sarcastically classified by insurance and express corporations as Acts of God.

Now to one who has lived all his days serenely in accord with the dictates of his own sense and conscience, the prospect for the morrow, such a situation naturally seems both appalling and intolerable, at the first blush. It must be confessed that, to begin with, Kirkwood drew a long and disconsolate face over his fix. And in that black hour, primitive of its kind in his brief span, he became conscious of a sinister apparition taking shape at his elbow—a shade of darkness which, clouting him on the neck with a scimitar hand, croaked hollow salutations in his ear.

"Come, Mr. Kirkwood, come!" Its mirthless accents railed him. "Have you no welcome for me?—you, who have been permitted to live the quarter of a century without making my acquaintance? Surely, now, it's high time we were earning something of one another, you and I!"

"But I don't understand," returned Kirkwood blankly. "I don't know you."

"True! But you shall: I am the Shade of Care!"

"Dull Care!" murmured Kirkwood, bewildered and dismayed; for the visitation had come upon him with little presage and no invitation whatever. Now Care mocked him with a sardonic laugh, and sought to tighten upon his shoulders his bony grasp; but Kirkwood resolutely shrugged it off and went in search of man's most faithful dumb friend, to wit, his pipe; the which, when found and filled, he lighted with a spillovered twist from the envelope of a cable message which had been vicariously responsible for his introduction to the shade of Care.

"It's about time," he announced, watching the paper blacken and burn in the grate fire, "that I was doing something to prove my title to a living." And this was all his valedictory to a vanished competence. "Anyway," he added nastily, "if I should ever get my money back, I might have read into his tone a trace of vain repining; 'anyway,' I'm a sight better off than those poor devils

over there! I really have a great deal to be thankful for, now that my attention's drawn to it."

For the ensuing few minutes he thought it all over, soberly, but with a stout heart; standing at a window of his bedroom in the Hotel Pless, hands deep in trouser pockets, puffing voluminously, his eyes wandering out over a blurred infinitude of wet, shining roofs and sooty chimney pots—all of London that a lowering drizzle would let him see, and withal by no means a cheering prospect, nor yet one calculated to offset the disheartening influence of the indomitable shade of Care. But the truth is that Kirkwood's brain comprehended little that his eyes perceived; his thoughts, with his heart, and that was half a world away and sick with pity for another and a fairer city, stricken in the flower of her loveliness, writhing in Promethean agony with a scimitar hand, croaked hollow salutations in his ear.

There came a rapping at the door. Kirkwood removed the pipe from between his teeth long enough to say, "Come in!" pleasantly.

The knob was turned, the door opened. Kirkwood, swinging on one heel, beheld hesitating upon the threshold a diminutive figure in the livery of the Pless pages.

"Mister Kirkwood?"

Kirkwood nodded.

"Gentleman to see you, sir."

Kirkwood nodded again, smiling. "Show him up, please," he said. But before the words were fairly out of his mouth a footfall sounded in the corridor, a hand was placed upon the shoulder of the page, gently but with decision swinging him out of the way, and a man stepped into the room.

"Mr. Brentwick!" Kirkwood almost shouted, jumping forward to seize his visitor's hand.

"My dear boy!" replied the latter. "I'm delighted to see you. Got your note not an hour ago, and came at once—you see!"

"It was mighty good of you. Sit down, please. Here are cigars."

Why, a moment ago I was the most miserable and lonely mortal on the footstool!"

"I can fancy," the elder man looked up, smiling at Kirkwood from the depths of his arm chair, as the latter stood above him, resting an elbow on the mantel. "The management knows me," he offered explanation of his unceremonious appearance; "so I took the liberty of following on the heels of the bell boy, dear boy. And how are you? Why are you in London, enjoying our abominable spring weather? And why the anxious uneasiness I detected in your note?"

He continued to stare curiously into Kirkwood's face. At a glance, this Mr. Brentwick was a man of tallish figure and rather slender; with a countenance thin and flushed a sensitive pink, out of

which his eyes shone, keen, alert, humorous and a trace wistful behind his glasses. His years were indeterminate; with the aspect of fifty, the spirit and the verve of thirty asserted oddly. But his hands were old, delicate, fine and fragile; and the lips beneath the droop-

ing white mustache at times trembled, almost imperceptibly, with the generous sentiments that came with mellow age. He held his back straight and his head with an air—an air that was not a swagger but the sign-token of seasoned experience in the world. The most carping could have found no flaw

in the quiet taste of his attire. To sum up, Kirkwood's very good friend—and his only one then in London—Mr. Brentwick looked and was an English gentleman.

"Why?" he persisted, as the younger man hesitated. "I am here to find out, to-night, I leave for the Continent. In the meantime—"

"And at midnight I sail for the States," added Kirkwood. "That is mainly why I wished to see you—to say good-by, for the time."

"You're going home?"—A shadow clouded Brentwick's clear eyes.

"The painting can wait," reiterated "Your genius!"

"My ability, such as it is—and that only. It can wait. . . . No; this means simply that I must come down from the clouds, plant my feet on solid earth, and get to work."

"The sentiment is sound," admitted Brentwick, "the practice of it, folly. Have you stopped to think what part a rising young portrait painter can contribute toward the rebuilding of a devastated city?"

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